

7 How and why did Lenin succeed in staying in power between 1917 and 1924?

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SOVIET POWER

Lenin had no concerns about removing the freedoms the Provisional Government had granted after the February revolution. The Bolsheviks argued that the Provisional Government was only an instrument of bourgeois capitalism, opposed to the interests of the working class. Therefore it was legitimate to deprive owners of their land, banks and factories, in addition to the vote. The creation of the one-party state was also high on Lenin's agenda. Proof of his ruthless, pragmatic approach was seen in two events that took place soon after the October revolution.

- The signing of an armistice with Germany, followed by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which gave away huge areas of land and resources. It was necessary in order for the new regime to have peace and time to consolidate. In any case, Lenin expected a revolution in Germany which might lead to a restoration of Russia's losses.
- Dissolving the newly elected Constituent Assembly, because it failed to produce a Bolshevik majority.

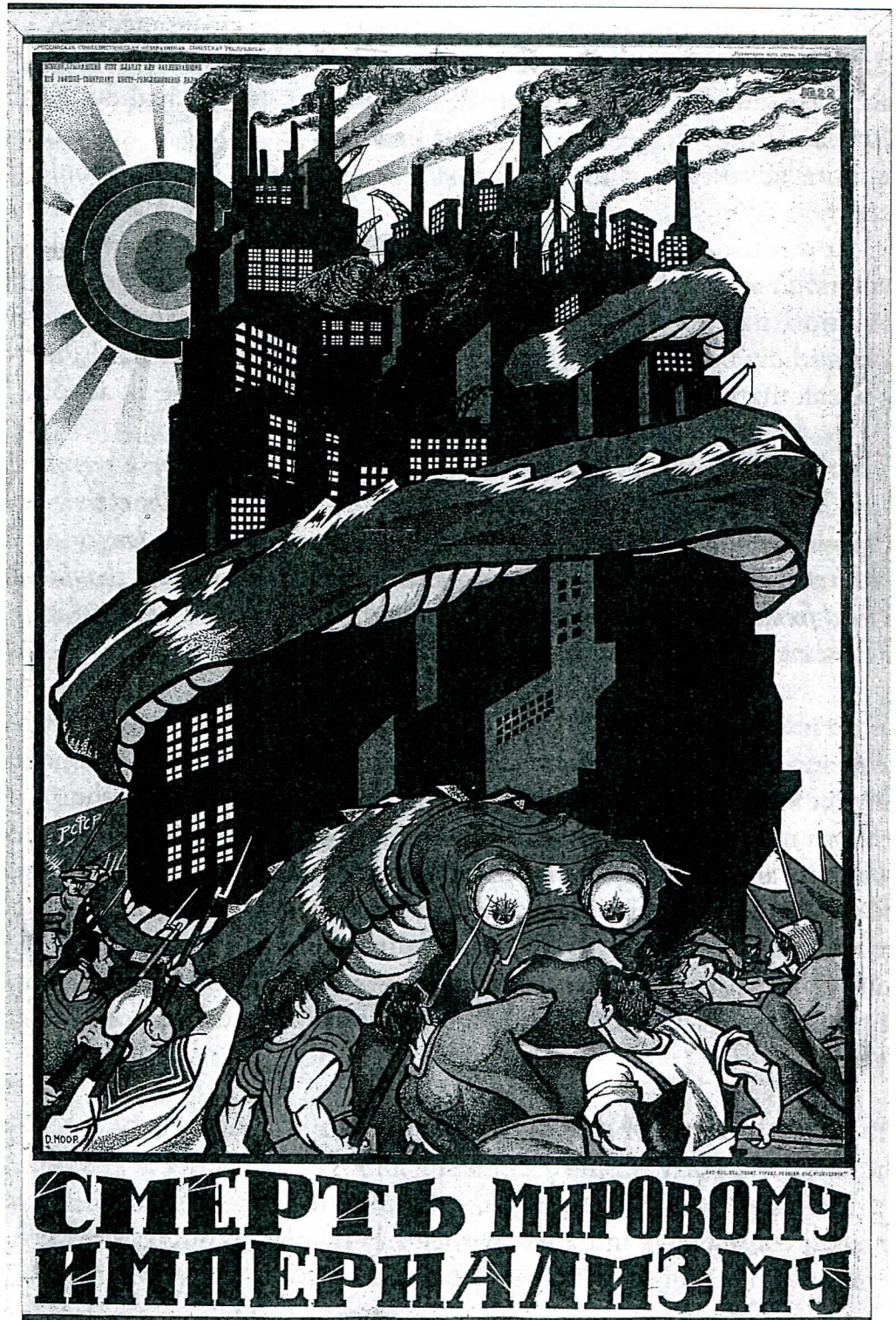
The latter action in particular was interpreted by many western, anti-Soviet historians as evidence of the fundamentally totalitarian nature of Bolshevism. Born as a secretive, disciplined party, intolerant of dissent, the Bolshevik Party was hardly likely to change its nature on coming to power. In any case, the situation required ruthlessness and determination to survive.

Having seized power in a small area of Russia in 1917, the Bolsheviks were bound to face opposition from a range of opponents once these had woken up to the implications of the October coup. The Bolsheviks had a bitter struggle to survive. The civil war intensified authoritarian trends within the Communist Party, including the centralisation of the Communist Party structure itself, although there is some debate among historians as to whether these developments would have taken place even without a war.

Results of the elections for the Constituent Assembly, which met briefly in 1918.

	Votes	Number of deputies	% of the vote
SRs	21.8 million	410	53%
Bolsheviks	10.0 million	175	24%
Kadets	2.1 million	17	5%
Mensheviks	1.4 million	18	3%
Others	6.3 million	62	15%

1919 Bolshevik propaganda poster, depicting death to the serpent of imperialism.



THE NEW SOVIET STATE

The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly

When the elections to the Assembly (planned before the October revolution) were held in November 1917 on the principle of universal suffrage, the results were as shown in the table on page 69.

The results were a blow to Lenin, who promptly closed down the Assembly. This was apparently proof of his determination to stay in power and also of the Bolsheviks' contempt for 'bourgeois' democratic forms. The dissolution has been seized on by many historians as evidence of an early move towards the establishment of a one-party state.

Bolsheviks saw the events differently. In the elections they had done well in the larger industrial cities. Lenin claimed that these results represented the more 'advanced' sections of the working class, whose views should carry more weight than more 'backward' areas of Russia. On a broader level, it was also claimed that the Assembly was 'a cover for bourgeois revolution', and that in the confusion immediately following the October revolution, many Russians did not really understand for whom they were voting. Many historians have rejected this interpretation. Richard Pipes is representative of the unsympathetic interpretation of Bolshevik actions:

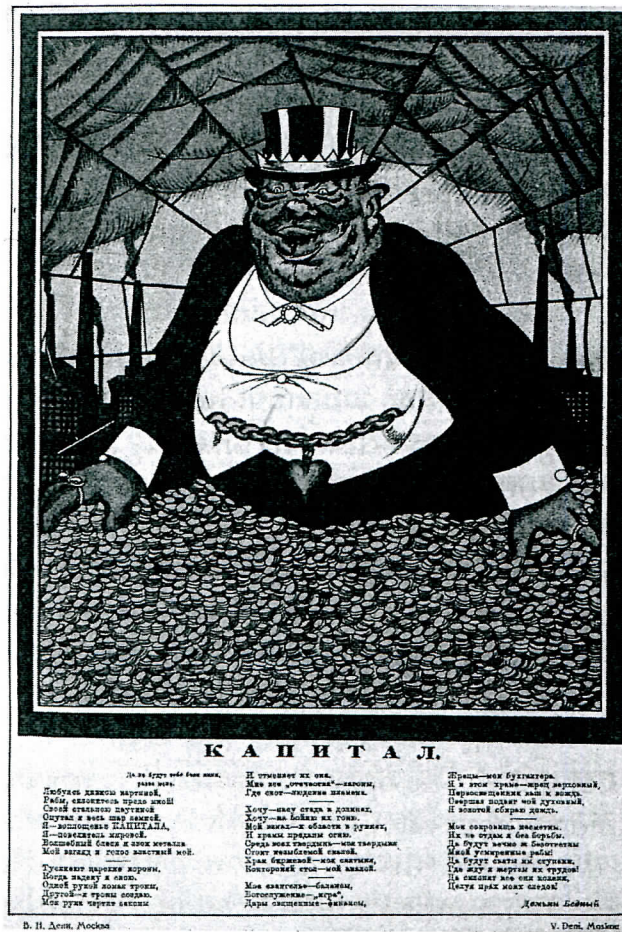
*The critical event in the political degeneration of the Bolshevik regime was the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly. If, as the Bolsheviks claimed in self-justification, the Assembly elected in November 1917 no longer reflected the mood of the masses as of January 1918, then they should have held fresh elections instead of liquidating it (Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*).*

Historians more sympathetic to Lenin's standpoint – for example, Marcel Liebmann – have been more inclined to accept the Bolshevik argument that factors such as the division within the SR movement since the elections nullified the result. Liebmann also argued that 'the industrial proletariat and the masses it led were against the Constituent Assembly and for the Soviets; the bourgeoisie and the conservative or reactionary elements were, on the contrary, against the Soviets and for the Constituent Assembly' (Liebmann, *Leninism Under Lenin*). This view legitimised or at least explained Lenin's actions in the context of the time.

The centralisation of power within the Communist Party

The Bolshevik Party was far from being a monolithic entity at the time of the revolution. Local branches of the Communist Party and local *soviets* exercised considerable initiative, particularly in a large country in which communications, never easy, had been further disrupted by war.

**A 1919
Bolshevik poster
caricaturing the
evils of
capitalism.**



Historians such as Leonard Schapiro (*The Communist Party of the Soviet Union*) claim that centralisation in the hands of a Party elite was always high on the Bolshevik agenda. Other historians have paid less attention to centralising tendencies, looking not so much at central Party structures as other institutions like the *soviets*. These acted as instruments of local government, particularly from the summer of 1918 when old local government institutions such as the *zemstvos* and the *dumas* were abolished. Political groups such as the Mensheviks and SRs were expelled from the *soviets*, which were also responsible between 1918 and 1922 for mobilisation and conscription into the Red Army (among other functions). The nature of the *soviets* began to change, but the debate is about the extent to which this was intentional or accidental. Although the *soviets* began life as revolutionary mass bodies, they quickly became bureaucratic organs of local government under central control, and remained so for the next 70 years.

There is evidence that in the months after the revolution many village and city *soviets* were subject to the pull of 'local patriotism' and acted independently. In other cases they became almost defunct. But from 1919 there was considerable strengthening of control over the Communist Party by the central organisation.

Although local Party representatives were regularly sent to Party congresses, the more significant process was sending out representatives from the centre to gradually take control of local Party organisations, bringing them into line with the objectives of the central leadership. That leadership itself was concentrated initially in the Central Committee, but from 1919 in the *Politburo*. Administration was centralised in the *Orgburo* and the Secretariat.

The Party structure was democratic on paper, since each level of the Communist Party administration was supposed to represent the views of delegates from the organisation below. In practice, however, it was a 'top down' rather than a 'bottom up' model, since key decisions were handed down from above. Centralisation was certainly partly due to the civil war, which made such control and uniform decision making seem imperative, and many local Party members welcomed support from the centre. But was centralisation also inherent in the Communist Party philosophy and structure?

The Tenth Party Congress. The opportunity for dissent or free expression of individual opinion within the Communist Party was steadily eroded. A key moment was the Tenth Party Congress of 1921, which banned factions within the Communist Party. While the Decree on Party Unity did not stop disagreement among leading communists, it did effectively silence free debate at a lower level. Groups previously at odds with the leadership – notably the Democratic Centralists calling for less centralised control, and the Workers' Opposition group, which wanted less Party authority over workers in the factories – were silenced. Historians often see this measure as an inevitable step in the formalisation of communist control.

KEY TERM

Politburo A small group usually of about nine key figures who met weekly and made policy.



An 'Agitship' used to spread communist propaganda.

The significance of the date should be emphasised; 1921 was the year of the Kronstadt Revolt. Leaving aside the resistance to collectivisation a decade later, this revolt was the last expression of armed resistance to the communist regime by what had once been loyal supporters. Soon afterwards Lenin introduced the NEP. However, this economic relaxation was deliberately accompanied by the ban on factions to signify the fact that economic 'retreat' might be a necessity, but was to be accompanied by more centralisation and clampdown of dissent within the Communist Party, to ensure the dominance of the leadership.

There was certainly no indication of retreat here. In his new role of General Secretary, Stalin was able to use this decree to further discipline the Communist Party membership. Later, he used the ban on factions to help him overcome rivals for the leadership after Lenin's death.

Although historians still debate the exact role of the *soviets* and the degree to which there was any 'democracy' in the western liberal tradition, there is now a general consensus that the channels of power developed as follows in the two years or so after the revolution. At first the *soviets* were more important than the Communist Party in day-to-day administration, but the Communist Party gradually began to exercise power through the *soviets*, particularly under Yakov Sverdlov, who controlled both the Communist Party apparatus and was Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets until his death in March 1919. From 1919, the Communist Party was increasingly the dominant force, controlling all key appointments, so that *soviets* had only administrative functions.

There is a key debate about how monolithic the Communist Party actually was both at this time and later under Stalin.

The abolition of other parties and the establishment of the one-party state

The Bolsheviks' intentions may have seemed clear from the start, as seen in their treatment of the Constituent Assembly. However, while 'bourgeois' parties like the Kadets were banned early on, other left-wing parties were allowed to co-exist briefly, albeit they were increasingly harassed, finding it difficult, for example, to publish their newspapers.

The Left Socialist Revolutionaries had limited influence. In 1921, all other parties were banned and only the Communist Party (the official title of the Bolsheviks from March 1918) existed. Persecution of other parties was now formalised and by 1922 they had ceased to exist as formal structures. The one-party state was complete. Indeed, it was not until the late 1980s that other political parties were allowed to form and challenge the Communist Party for supremacy.



A communist poster from the early 1920s. The Menshevik and the Socialist Revolutionary try in vain to hold back the forward march of the determined worker.

However, the notion that Lenin established a monolithic Party almost overnight can no longer be defended. Although the Communist Party was loyal to the leadership of Lenin (as historians like Robert Service have shown), there were limits to the degree of centralisation and hierarchical power. Despite the prevailing ideology, there was still dissension and factionalism within the Communist Party. It was a dynamic as well as a bureaucratic Party. That is why there were to be periodic purges by the leadership. It also explains why Stalin destroyed the old party leadership in the 1930s. He understood that not everyone in the Communist Party

would always follow the leadership. Even Lenin found this before and after the revolution, when he had difficulty in persuading colleagues to follow his changes of policy.

Opposition from within the Communist Party to directives from the top was to be a recurring theme in Soviet history, although in the last decades of Soviet rule the opposition was more likely to come as a result of conservative reluctance to change rather than from deep-seated ideological disagreements over policy.

The establishment of Party control over the state

Although Russia was in chaos at the time of the Bolshevik take-over in 1917, it gave one considerable advantage to Lenin. He did not have to take account of the traditional structures of government and administration (which he despised in any case), and was instead free to create new forms. In this respect, Russia was in a fundamentally different situation from, for example, Germany at the time of the Nazi take-over in 1933, when existing forms of administration continued to exist alongside Nazi organisations.

The Bolsheviks created the Central Executive Committee, elected by the All-Russian Congress of Soviets. This body was elected by members of local *soviets* and had the responsibility of passing laws. However, in practice this meant rubber stamping decrees already decided by the higher organs of the Communist Party – principally the *Politburo*.

Above the Central Executive Committee was *Sovnarkom*, the Council of People's Commissars, which in theory directed policy. This dual system of state and Party institutions lasted as long as the USSR itself, but from the beginning the Communist Party institutions had much more power. Leading communists belonged to both state and Party organisations at the highest level.

The Soviet constitution of 1923, which replaced that of 1918, contained a strong element of fiction. The new constitution created a federal state, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), in which each republic had equal rights, including that of secession. This right was never exercised. Soviet historians interpreted this constitution as evidence of 'the practical realisation of Lenin's ideas of harmonising the principles of consolidating the state unity of the constituent republics with the provision of comprehensive guarantees of their sovereign rights' (Kukushkin, *History of the USSR*). The reality was that power was centralised in Moscow, increasingly so, and this emphasised the fact that it was the Communist Party that controlled the USSR rather than formal state structures.

Government by coercion

Another true indication of where power lay was the fact that the secret police was directly responsible to Party organs, not the state. The *Cheka*, set up soon after the revolution, was the instrument for eliminating all potential or real opposition to the regime. Replaced by the **OGPU** (in 1923), the **NKVD** (in 1934) and eventually the **KGB**, the political police eventually had its arbitrary powers restricted as recently as the 1960s onwards.

For many years after Lenin's death, historians argued about his responsibility for the terror that was part of Soviet rule in the years after the revolution. In the period of the NEP, the arbitrary use of terror considerably declined, to return with a vengeance under Stalin. Under Stalin's successors, the USSR remained a police state, but less arbitrary in its approach. Citizens who conformed were safe from persecution, although dissidents were liable to severe treatment.

Many historians argued that Lenin was less ruthless than Stalin. While accepting that there was a Red Terror during the civil war, it was often claimed that this was largely due to the desperation of the Bolshevik position during this period when the regime was fighting for its existence against equally ruthless enemies, and that terror was not something that was necessarily inherent or inevitable in the Soviet regime. Attempts were frequently made to distinguish Lenin's rule from that of Stalin, who took over a USSR that seemed more secure from its enemies, and therefore was in a situation in which there seemed less excuse for arbitrary use of terror.

The emphasis has changed in recent years. Evidence released after the collapse of the USSR increasingly showed Lenin's willingness, and indeed insistence, on using terror as a legitimate instrument of government, and his personal involvement in campaigns against groups such as the Mensheviks.

HOW DID THE BOLSHEVIKS WIN THE CIVIL WAR?

The civil war of 1918–21 was crucial in securing Soviet rule. Defeat would have meant the destruction of the Communist Party and the establishment of probably some sort of right-wing quasi-military regime, since the restoration of the monarchy was not an option for most Russians.

Most historians now accept that the Reds had many advantages in the civil war, including the unified leadership of the communists under Lenin, whose leadership was unchallenged, and the skill and determination of Trotsky in creating and leading the Red Army. Another advantage was the control by the communists of industrial centres, areas of concentrated population and interior lines of communication. The 'policy' of War Communism also helped their cause.

KEY TERMS

OGPU The initials translate as United State Political Administration.

NKVD The initials translate as People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs.

KGB In full, these initials stand for Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopastnosti, which translated means the Committee of State Security.

In contrast, the Whites, comprising various opponents of the Bolsheviks or Reds, appeared to suffer several disadvantages. There was a lack of a unified command or strategy leading to uncoordinated attacks and a lack of support from ordinary Russians who had no wish to give up their recently acquired land. Furthermore, the aid from foreign armies of intervention was largely ineffectual.

There is always a danger of interpretations being coloured by hindsight. But where there is disagreement among historians, it is often about the relative weight that should be given to Red 'advantages' and White 'disadvantages'. Francesco Benvenuti (*The Bolsheviks and the Red Army 1918–1922*) showed how, for all Trotsky's much-lauded skills, he faced opposition not just from within the Communist Party but also from some of the high command of the Red Army itself, which felt that he did not represent its interests sufficiently strongly. Evan Mawdsley (*The Russian Civil War*) emphasises many of the Reds' advantages in the war, while arguing that the personal contributions of Lenin and Trotsky should not be overrated. He also dispelled the traditional view of the White armies as being essentially class based, showing that many of the soldiers were of non-noble status.

Historians now pay more attention to those who did *not* fight for the Reds or Whites. Geoffrey Swain (*Russia's Civil War*), for example, described the 'unknown civil war' or the 'three-cornered fight' involving not just Reds and Whites but also the peasant armies or 'Greens'. These were generally led by anarchists or SRs, and they came far closer to success than is usually acknowledged, especially in Soviet historiography that focused on the Whites or 'class enemies' of the Bolsheviks.

Peasants were more prepared in the last resort to tolerate the Reds rather than the Whites, because the latter were not prepared to compromise on the issue of land ownership. However, the resistance of the peasantry to

A Bolshevik propaganda poster from the civil war. Generals Denikin and Yudenich are throttled by the hands of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.



grain requisitioning by the Reds played a major influence in later Bolshevik policy towards the peasants. Those like Stalin who faced peasant resistance during the civil war did not forget the experience, which influenced attitudes towards the peasants in the period of collectivisation of the late 1920s.

This continuity of experience led historian Andrea Graziosi to take a longer-term perspective. He described the civil war of 1918–21 as ending in a stalemate between Reds and Greens, one episode in what he called, during the period from 1917 to 1933, the ‘great Soviet peasant war’.

Other historians like Christopher Read (*From Tsar To Soviets*) have been critical of interpretations of the civil war as being a decisive force in shaping the Soviet system. While some commentators have written about the influence of the war in hardening attitudes within the Communist Party, militarising it and making it more ready to adopt harsher policies in future years, Read argued that centralisation of authority and an authoritarian approach were inherent in Bolshevik ideology. They would have been key features even if the civil war had not occurred.

The core of Bolshevism was its commitment to class warfare. In any case, Mawdsley argued that there was no real distinction between revolution and civil war, in that in the context of these years there could not be one without the other. The Bolsheviks seized power, and so as a minority force they were bound to face opposition from opponents who saw no valid reason for accepting the coup as a legitimate political outcome.

WAR COMMUNISM AND THE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY

The communist regime instituted a number of drastic economic measures to sustain the war effort in the civil war years. These included nationalisation, militarisation of industry to ensure that priority was given to war production and, perhaps most controversially, a ruthless policy of requisitioning food from the peasantry to ensure that industrial workers and the Red Army were fed.

The phrase ‘War Communism’ is really a misnomer. It was invented by Lenin in 1921 at the time when the NEP was being introduced. The phrase is also confusing because it has been used in different ways – for example, to describe the drastic economic measures adopted by the regime during this period, or to describe a particular mentality of ‘struggle’ that pervaded this and later periods, and even to describe the economic organisation later adopted by Stalin.

War Communism is sometimes seen as a co-ordinated policy, when in

fact the measures introduced were largely improvised and applied at various times during this period. Pressures from below forced nationalisation to go at a faster pace than the leadership originally intended. There was bound to be a clash between the utopianism of many Bolsheviks and the practical needs of the situation.

Interpretations have also been coloured by the ideological gloss given to these measures at the time and later. To ardent communists like Bukharin, the measures were welcome evidence that Russia was taking decisive steps on the road to creating socialism. Hence, for example, the fact that rampant inflation (with money losing its value and in many cases replaced by barter as a means of exchange) was welcomed as proof that the mechanisms of capitalism were already redundant.

Others have dwelt far less on the ideological gloss and have concentrated on the fact that War Communism was essentially a pragmatic response to an emergency situation. As economic historians like Silvana Malle showed (*The Economic Organisation of War Communism 1918–1921*), there was little coherence to the measures. Co-ordinated and centralised control of supply and distribution was achieved only in military production. Rational planning was further complicated by the lack of economic indicators to replace traditional market indicators.

One Soviet historian admitted that War Communism 'was, of course, a forced measure resulting from the extraordinarily difficult situation in Russia at that time. "War communism" is not an economically inevitable stage in the development of a socialist revolution' (Kukushkin, *History of the USSR*).

Lenin himself gave different interpretations of the measures taken by his regime during these years. When it was clear by 1921 that War Communism was creating major discontent (especially among the peasantry, who regarded requisitioning as state-sponsored theft) and industrial production was falling, he decided to change the policy. The signs of a dangerous backlash against the policy were already present, so Lenin had decided on the NEP before the Kronstadt Revolt. This has sometimes been taken as the ultimate symbol of discontent against the new communist regime, partly because Lenin himself referred to Kronstadt as an event that 'lit up reality like a flash of lightning'.

The NEP, with its emphasis on economic co-operation rather than coercion, its tolerance of private enterprise, and in particular the granting to peasants of the right to pay tax and keep their food supplies, marked a period of economic recovery. However, it is difficult to determine the extent to which this recovery was due to the NEP, and the extent to which it was due to the ending of the civil war and the consolidation of communist rule. Almost certainly it was a combination of both.

Lenin did not have a consistent view on the NEP. At various times he referred to it as a measure introduced entirely for pragmatic reasons, to end the dissatisfaction of the peasantry and ensure that the communists remained in power. At other times he gave it a firmer ideological justification, arguing that NEP was a logical step in the advance towards socialism – a form of state capitalism, a half-way house between capitalism and a socialist society in which private ownership would disappear.

Lenin's most realistic evaluation of War Communism and the reason for change was his statement that the communists had been 'carried away by a wave of enthusiasm ... We thought that by direct orders of the proletarian state, we could organise state production and distribution of products communistically in a land of petty peasants'. Lenin was recognising the fact that the peasant mentality did not fit in with his conception of socialism. A popular Soviet textbook of 1934 justified the changes in policy as follows:

War Communism fully justified itself in conditions of civil war. But it would have been a mistake to insist on a continuance of the policy of War Communism after those circumstances had disappeared which had necessitated it. The New Economic Policy did not flow only from the peculiar national features of Russia. NEP is the normal economic policy of the proletariat after revolution.

These debates were not just an ideological gloss. All communists, including Lenin, believed that socialism was the ultimate goal. The disagreements were about the pace of change and at what stage the process of achieving socialism through industrialisation could be achieved, particularly if the anticipated spread of revolution around the world did not materialise and the USSR were left isolated.

This did not stop strong disagreements among communists themselves. Many of these were highly critical of the NEP and its apparent compromise with private enterprise, which permitted the growth of a class of entrepreneurs and wealthy peasants who were able to make profits at the expense of others.

A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL REVOLUTION?

The communists were not interested just in economic change. There was enthusiasm for bringing about a genuine social and cultural revolution. After all, Marxists referred to cultural and social factors as part of the superstructure of society that overlay the economic base, the dictatorship of the proletariat. Early Soviet measures revealed a mixture of idealism and ruthlessness characteristic of this period.

The Church. The Bolsheviks were bound to oppose the authority of the Orthodox Church as one of the traditional pillars of support of the tsarist regime, and a competing ideological force. Hence they carried out drastic measures such as the nationalisation of Church property. However, as a pragmatic recognition of the hold the Church still had over ordinary people (especially in the countryside), worship was still allowed, although discouraged. Brutal attacks on Church personnel and property in the early months of the civil war had failed to destroy it as an institution.

The problem of Church–state relations was to persist throughout Soviet history. Soviet historians painted the Church as leading the forces of counter-revolution against the communists. However, there is now more recognition of the fact that the hierarchy of the Church generally adopted a neutral or even conciliatory position once it realised early on that the communist regime seemed likely to stay.

Until the 1960s there were periodic bouts of persecution and tolerance. Less tolerated than the Orthodox Church were religious groups that sought to overtly evangelise and gain converts. In republics with a predominantly Muslim population, the Bolsheviks were initially cautious, since religion was so bound up with everyday life. Under Stalin the approach hardened, with attempts to ‘russify’ the population and create ‘Soviet man’, free from all ideologies that competed with the official communist one. But this was never completely successful.

A legitimate criticism of western historiography is that the importance of the Orthodox Church in Russia has been underestimated. Even though it was already in a state of internal crisis at the time of the revolution and faced considerable anti-clerical feeling, the Church continued to maintain a hold on sections of the population.

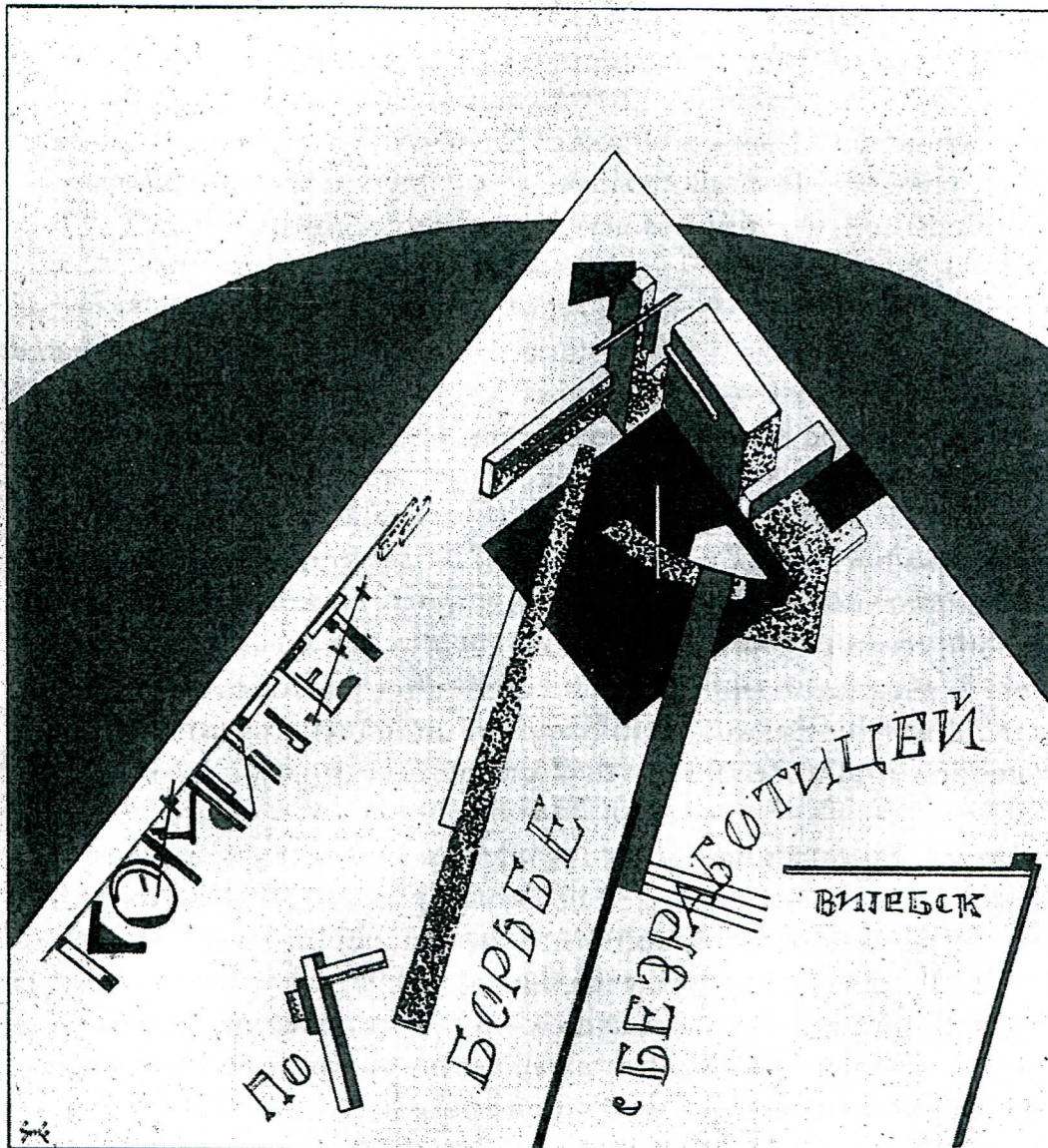
Social equality. At first, women appeared to gain considerably from the Bolshevik revolution. They were granted social equality and greater freedoms to get divorce and abortion. These gains were largely illusory. Women remained essentially second class citizens, particularly in Muslim areas. Most tellingly, women did not have an impressive record of promotion within the ranks of the Communist Party itself.

Too often, historians have treated women as a cohesive group, when in reality the revolution had a very different impact on different groups. Over 50 per cent of female recruits to the Communist Party between 1917 and 1921 came from the middle and upper ranks of society. Some 37 per cent were proletarians, and only 5 per cent peasants. Female peasants were not won over by the revolution, and were to play a major part in the resistance to collectivisation in the late 1920s.

Women in the cities were far more affected by the Bolshevik revolution, although greater access to education and employment was counterbalanced by their continued domestic responsibilities and traditional male assumptions.

The fate of particular social groups depended largely on how they were viewed by the new regime. The 'bourgeoisie', a term conveniently used to include not just property owners, businessmen and other representatives of capitalist society, but anyone with whom the communists disagreed, lost not only their property but also other privileges or rights. For example, only 'socially useful' citizens retained the right to vote.

Cultural revolution. Lenin was a cultural conservative. He did accept that proletarian culture would look very different from the 'traditional' Russian culture that he himself enjoyed. However, he believed that attitudes could not be changed overnight.



Lazar Lissitzky's 1919 cover design for the book *The Committee for Fighting Unemployment*.

New forms of cultural expression were enthusiastically embraced – notably the cinema, which had great propaganda potential. Many artists, writers and musicians, by no means all communists, carried out their own revolution in the arts, although often building on movements already taking place before 1917. However, many intellectuals were not communists. Experimentation in the arts was not just the preserve of enthusiasts like Vladimir Mayakovsky who eagerly embraced new ‘proletarian’ forms.

Compared with the Stalinist era, Lenin’s regime was relatively tolerant of individual cultural expression. It was still possible to create works of art and literature that were not overtly political. However, political expression was strictly censored.

The effects of cultural change have been debated at length. To what extent was there a new proletarian ideology? The experimental political films of Sergei Eisenstein have been widely admired for their innovative techniques, especially in the West. However, some evidence suggests that ordinary Russians much preferred Hollywood films. Under Stalin they were to have no choice.

Some cultural historians – for example, James von Geldern and Richard Stites (*Mass Culture in Soviet Russia*) – have examined the difference of opinion between communists like Lenin who believed that the political structure must be changed before a genuine proletarian culture could emerge, and more radical communists who saw the establishment of proletarian culture as a prerequisite of a workers’ state. Geldern and Stites highlighted the continuation of existing forms of culture and the difficulty the state encountered in getting the public to consume what it wanted.

Other historians, like Peter Kenz (for example, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilisation 1917–1929*), have emphasised the pervasive nature of communist propaganda immediately after the revolution, and the fact that the Bolsheviks soon succeeded in blocking out alternative points of view to their own. The disillusioned Bolshevik Yevgeny Zamyatin wrote the novel *We* in 1920, satirising the new totalitarianism. It was to influence George Orwell’s *1984*, but Zamyatin could not publish the novel in the USSR.

The communists replaced many organisations with their own, particularly the youth movement. They paved the way for the even more intense campaigns of the Stalinist era, which built on earlier attempts and probably had more success in steering a mass audience into the regime’s way of thinking.

HOW DIFFERENT WAS LENIN'S RUSSIA FROM TSARIST RUSSIA?

Political structures and practices

Russia was an autocracy under the tsar, and in essence under Lenin also. The tsar had few restrictions on either his legislative or executive powers, although it was accepted that his divine right authority carried with it the responsibility to protect his people. The tsar owned most of the country's resources, and he could demand service from his subjects. His ministers were not responsible to the *duma* once that was established, and the tsar could appoint or remove ministers at will.

Lenin did not have an official government position. However, his position within the Communist Party was unchallenged. Although in theory Russia had a 'dictatorship of the proletariat', in practice decisions were taken by a small group of leading Party members, inside or outside the *Politburo*. Lenin interfered in the smallest detail of government, just like the tsars.

In essence, Russia was a dictatorship before and after the revolution. The differences were that the Communist Party claimed to derive its authority not from God but from the will of the proletariat, and in practice it was more efficient in enforcing its authority. Arguably, Lenin's secret police was more feared than that of the tsar, was more arbitrary in its operations and was responsible for far more deaths and imprisonments.

However, some historians (for example, Pipes) have emphasised the continuity between the repression of pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary regimes:

The tsarist state police developed sophisticated methods of surveillance, infiltrating society through a network of paid informers and opposition parties with the help of professional agents ... Its methods were all too familiar to Russian revolutionaries who, on coming to power, adopted them and turned them against their enemies. The Cheka and its successors assimilated the practices of the tsarist state police to such an extent that as late as the 1980s, the KGB distributed to its staff manuals prepared by the Okhrana nearly a century earlier (Pipes, Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime).

On the other hand, the Soviet secret police never voluntarily allowed potential opponents to go into exile where they could plot against the regime. Trotsky lived abroad after his fall from power, but was eventually hunted down and killed by a Stalinist agent.

Soviet Russia was the first of the modern one-party dictatorships to use a

combination of force and propaganda to maintain a hold on the population. The tsarist regime also used force, censorship and propaganda less efficiently – although additionally it had the advantages of traditional deference and the authority of the Church to reinforce its authority, and for most of its existence it had a wider base of social support.

A major difference was the social composition of the ruling class. The tsarist regime relied on an educated bureaucratic class, as well as the aristocracy. The communist regime used some members of the old bureaucracy, but increasingly created its own bureaucracy of Party members, many of whom came from lower social origins, and had either forged their Party careers during the civil war or had joined the Communist Party in the subsequent years. Both tsarist and communist bureaucracies were free from public scrutiny.

The economy and society

There were important differences as well as similarities between communist and tsarist economy and society. There had been a significant degree of state intervention in the tsarist economy – for example, in railway construction. But there had also been private enterprise, bolstered by investment from abroad. Under the NEP, there was a combination of state control, with the government running the ‘commanding heights of the economy’ such as the railways and mines. But there was also private enterprise responsible for smaller enterprises and agriculture.

Although the aristocracy lost its land in 1917 and many fled the country between 1917 and 1921, about 100,000 remained in Russia during the 1920s. The middle classes regained some of their influence under the NEP, becoming traders and businessmen. Industrial workers still lived and worked in relatively poor conditions and still had few rights. The unions had little power, and many workers still regarded themselves as being exploited by the government or their employers.

In contrast, many peasants had gained compared with tsarist days. Many of those who had survived the trauma of the civil war and War Communism now had their own land, and the *kulaks*, or richer peasants, did well, although there were divisions between rich and poor peasants. All were relatively free from communist control, since the Communist Party remained weak in the countryside until the period of collectivisation. Very few peasants joined the Communist Party.

In some essentials there were major similarities between Lenin’s Russia and tsarist Russia. Both claimed ownership of productive resources; both claimed the right to make citizens work for the state.

Russia in the 1920s was in a state of limbo. The regime had survived the

crisis of the civil war, and although facing a hostile capitalist world, had begun to forge relationships with foreign governments based on a desire for trade and foreign expertise. NEP Russia appeared to be recovering, but it was an uneasy period, especially for those in the Communist Party. The NEP was still seen as a compromise, and it was widely accepted that, at some stage, Russia would move to a more socialist form of society, which would involve major dislocations in society as well as the economy. Meanwhile Lenin's successors were manoeuvring for power.

CONCLUSION: HOW SIGNIFICANT WAS LENIN?

Lenin's importance within the USSR was as great in death as in life, and until the break-up of the USSR he was beyond criticism. Even in the 1980s, when the last Soviet leader Gorbachev was trying to implement market reforms in the economy, he invoked Lenin's use of the NEP to give authority to his own reforms. Lenin was at least as important as a symbol as he was a historical figure. His importance can be summarised as follows.

- As an icon, whose name was invoked to justify whatever policies the current Soviet leadership was promoting.
- As a theorist, who adapted Marxism as it suited the needs of the moment or to justify policies like the NEP after the event. It was also Lenin who created the concept of the one-party state and added his own views on subjects such as imperialism, which had not featured prominently in Marx's work. Some commentators like Neil Harding (*Leninism*) have written about Lenin's inconsistencies and unorthodoxy in his beliefs, and have concluded that he was ultimately unimportant as a theorist. However, inconsistent as his theories might be, they gave generations of communists the confidence that whatever they did, it was legitimate.
- As a man of action, without whom it is difficult to imagine the October revolution or the Reds' survival after 1917. Despite his own prominent role in these events, Trotsky conceded Lenin's primacy in his biography of Lenin, published in 1925.

All interpretations of Lenin agree on his importance, even those Soviet historians who followed the orthodox line that individuals were less important than economic and social forces in determining the course of history. Interpretations outside the USSR varied. Sympathisers regarded Lenin as an inspiration both to Russia and exploited classes everywhere. Those opposing this view regarded him as a ruthless power-driven dictator, a precursor of Stalin and a leader responsible for enormous suffering. Most interpretations were between these two extremes.

More sympathetic views have tended to emphasise Lenin's idealism and genuine concern for ordinary people. The excesses of the post-revolutionary period are explained by the chaotic condition of Russia in the civil war, which encouraged excesses on both sides. Sympathisers also point to Lenin's willingness to adapt policies in 1921, and the fact that Lenin himself agonised in his last years about the growth of the bureaucracy, something he never foresaw.

More critical interpretations suggest that Lenin himself was responsible for the situation he bemoaned, that he was personally responsible for the terror. Had he lived longer, there would have been further dislocations in Russia, although perhaps his excesses would not have been on the scale of Stalin's. What all historians agree on is that Lenin had a profound influence on the Russian revolution and subsequent period, for good or ill.

Only as recently as the late-1980s onwards have Russian historians begun to criticise aspects of Lenin's rule – for example, his treatment of opponents. Those like Dmitri Volkogonov, a former Red Army officer who had access to previously unreleased files, have been critical of Lenin's authoritarianism, which prevented Russia taking the path of democratic development:

*To flourish, communism needed a military threat, and both domestic and foreign enemies. The defeat of Leninism was programmed by history. Lenin had only one chance to save it: he could have preserved political pluralism after October 1917 and given scope to social democratic aspirations and traditions. But that would not have been the Leninist way (Volkogonov, *Lenin: A New Biography*).*

Western interpretations of Lenin were always more varied. Some Marxist sympathisers like Christopher Hill (in *Lenin and the Russian Revolution*) have praised Lenin as leader of the oppressed. The so-called 'liberal' historians were critical of Lenin since they were hostile to the authoritarian communist regime and its policies, and apportioned a major share of the responsibility for these to Lenin. Exponents of this view include Leonard Schapiro and, in more recent years, Richard Pipes. Pipes in particular has been extremely critical:

Lenin owes his historical prominence not to his statesmanship, which was of a very inferior order, but to his generalship. He was one of history's great conquerors ... he was the first head of state to treat politics, domestic as well as foreign, as warfare in the literal sense of the word, the objective of which was not to compel the enemy to submit but to annihilate him ... It did not help him build a viable social and political order ... Judged in terms of its own aspirations, the communist regime was a monumental

failure: it succeeded in one thing only, staying in power. But since for Bolsheviks power was not an end in itself but means to an end, its mere retention does not qualify the experiment as a success (Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*).

In his collection of previously unpublished sources (*The Unknown Lenin*), Pipes presented Lenin as a manipulative, ruthless dictator with 'utter disregard for human life' and scorn for individual human beings, with particular contempt for Russians: 'In dealing with non-Bolsheviks, he either played on fear or appealed to greed. To dominate the human beings under his control, he resorted to unbridled violence.'

Revisionist historians such as Sheila Fitzpatrick (*The Russian Revolution 1917–1932*) and Robert Service (*Lenin: A Political Life*) have tended to downplay Lenin's importance – for example, by focusing on the difficulties he sometimes encountered in imposing his will on colleagues. Historians now frequently analyse less overtly political trends – for example, studying what happened at grass-roots level in the factories and on the farms, believing that there is too much emphasis on politicians.

The debate about Lenin's significance will continue, because it is bound up with the Russian revolution, itself one of the most significant events of the twentieth century. The works of historians like Service, Edward Acton (*Rethinking the Russian Revolution*) and Geoffrey Hosking (*A History of the Soviet Union*) are quite balanced, but interpretations will continue to change as the events of this period, as of any important historical era, are seen from a new perspective.